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ABSTRACT

To test theories presented in the sociology course "Social Policies and Community Power Structure," a team of undergraduate students and their instructor attended a national professional conference. The following are examples of those concepts the students observed in operation at the conference: Social structure affects social policies; the creative use of conflict can be used to restructure relations between groups; guidelines exist to determine whether pluralism or elitism prevails in a given power structure; non-decisionmaking, as the counterpart of decisionmaking, must be examined to determine who holds power; values, feasibility, and effectiveness must be considered in choosing social policies to support. It is suggested that this method of enriching classroom experience can be generalized to include local as well as national settings. Specific recommendations are made for sociology departments developing such projects. (JT)

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APPLYING POWER THEORIES TO FIELD SETTINGS

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APPLYING POWER THEORIES TO FIELD SETTINGS

A continuing problem to sociology instructors is that of bringing highly complex social theories to life. In pursuit of this objective, the writer demonstrated to students that theories could be learned through participant observation in a setting outside the confines of the university. When a team of undergraduate students was authorized to join the instructor in attending a national conference, it proved an excellent setting in which to test theories presented in the course Social Policies and Community Power Structure.

This paper is designed to demonstrate the enrichment of the classroom experience by student-faculty attendance at selected conferences, meetings, and hearings, and to suggest that this method can be generalized to include local as well as national settings.

Theories Learned

In the classroom, students were taught the institutional approach to social problems, (Skolnick and Currie, 1970), the creative use of conflict (Coser, 1964; Dodson, 1967), the importance of values, feasibility and effectiveness in determining social policy (Miller and Rein, 1970), and power theories of elitism and pluralism, as they relate to social policy (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970; Domhoff, 1967, 1970; Polsby, 1967). By the completion of the course, students were expected to select and to analyze critically an issue at the local, state or national level for evidence of pluralism or elitism

in the decision-making process. The students attending the conference had just completed the written course work.

The basic concepts of the course can be applied in any social setting where decisions are made and power relations occur. In this case, a national professional conference, whose manifest objective is to disseminate current information in a given field and accomplish the minimal business necessary to group-maintenance, also serves the latent function of perpetuating the status quo. Through its policies of inclusion and exclusion, the strengths of newly-emerging groups can be determined. This is analogous to determining whether "shifting coalitions can and do emerge" as the pluralists contend (Polsby; 115), or whether "a governing class dominates key policy-forming processes and manifests itself through a power elite" (Domhoff, 1970: 109). Thus, the conference becomes the case study to test learned theories.

Some of the many objective criteria for testing pluralist or elitist theory can be met in such short-term settings. It is the author's belief that sufficient examples of abstract concepts surface to afford empirical application of these to students. Certainly, the excitement generated as students spontaneously translate their experiences at the conference into such terms as "bureaucracy," "cooptation," "nondecision-making," "latent consequences," and "blaming the victim" confirmed this belief. In addition, they can become involved in the process of pressure group formation, as was the case with one student who assumed leadership in a new youth caucus.

Conference Observations: The Case Study

Among the concepts students learned in the course, the following are examples of those the students themselves observed in operation at the conference:

Social structure affects social policies.

In adopting the institutional approach, the students defined the problem as one of inequality for the ethnic minority groups and women who were now clamoring for attention to their problems.

To the students, the conference was a highly organized bureaucracy governed by a fairly rigid set of rules and procedures. Its structure of officers, Board members, and committees reflected a paucity of minority group members, which affected the social policies of the organization.

Even when the leaders had instituted new forms to deal with controversial issues, students observed that by-laws and parliamentary procedures were invoked to resist change. For example, demands for greater representation of minority groups, women, and youth on the slate of officers and committee members to be elected were met with citation of previously legitimized nominating procedures, which precluded new nominations at that time. The leaders initially relied on the structure to avoid changing their social policies, until their position became untenable. After considerable agitation from the floor, the session chairman agreed to seek by-law revision for the next conference.

Students observed that, as a result of the frustrating atmosphere, many delegates left the conference early. They concluded that had the leadership been more responsive when

the demands were first presented, the net effect on the delegates would have been improved.

The creative use of conflict can be used to restructure relations between groups.

At a social issues session, the statement to be submitted to the Democratic and Republican Platform Committees in the name of the conference provoked considerable conflict between different constituencies. The welfare rights groups wished to include a specific recommendation for the proposed $6500 guaranteed annual income, for example, while the prepared statement was a general endorsement of a minimum income guarantee. The students perceived that the chairman cut off debate prematurely, failing to use the emerging conflict as an aid to restructuring group relations. Rather than risk permitting extended debate and resolution of the issues on the floor, it was decided that the Board would consider all suggested revisions and report its decision to the plenary session later in the week. When the amended platform statement was re-submitted, the language had been reworked but not substantively altered.

The students saw the activists as frustrated by their aborted attempt to assert influence. In the face of the Board response, these minority groups resigned themselves to the familiar position of powerlessness. The opportunity for the conference leadership to have used conflict creatively to restructure group relations was lost.

The students questioned how those groups seeking a reallocation of the resources of the country could hope to be

successful if they failed even within their own organization to redistribute power. The students sensed that the process of cooptation was at work, and that providing a forum for minority groups to vent their grievances served to siphon off more vociferous protest and to function as a social control.

Guidelines exist to determine whether pluralism or elitism prevails in a given power structure.

During the conference week, the students gained evidence that appeared supportive of each theory in turn. To the pluralists' criterion of open access to participation, the students saw evidence of broad participation in the free booths, caucus space and sessions devoted to minority issues. But only members received these benefits, and membership requirements struck the students as quite rigid.

The presence within the conference of competing interest groups and the coalition of minority caucuses further supported a pluralist view. In answer to the pluralist question, "who gains, who loses?" the students saw the benefits to the minority groups whose resolutions were passed at the plenary sessions as further evidence of pluralism. Analyzing which groups dominated, the students were skeptical of whether the ultimate outcome of the Board's promises to the activists would in fact materialize.

On the other hand, elitist theory maintained that power resides in the governing class which controls the key positions in the society. The students noted that the slate of officers put forth and elected by the conference participants

for the following year was completely dominated by the prevailing elite. The conference at large had called for greater representation on the Board of blacks, Chicanos, Asian-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Indian-Americans, women, and youth. But their protest was unheeded for the immediate future. The resolutions were to be forwarded to the next Nominating Committee, but no assurance of compliance was possible. The students were hopeful that the Board and committees would be expanded to provide proportional representation, but they feared that elitism would continue to prevail.

The students concluded that the week-long conference was too short an observation to accurately assess which theory was better substantiated. But applying theories to action whetted their appetites for participation in the next conference.

Nondecision-making, as the counterpart of decision-making, must be examined to determine who holds power.

The students viewed fragmentation, lack of coordination and avoidance of current controversies as examples of nondecision-making.

Illustrative of fragmentation was the gap between the radical Presidential opening address and the subsequent workshops. The conference President called for more social change activists, for political action, for overcoming powerlessness, and for coalitions of minority groups to accomplish social change. Several other general sessions echoed this call to action, and the students expected working sessions to give evidence of implementation, an important stage in social policy development. Conference leaders did not coordinate the sessions, however, to achieve the mobilization of participants

in breaking the barriers to social change.

An example of fragmentation and lack of coordination was a workshop, The Challenge of Ethnic Coalitions. Leaders of the session instructed each minority group to caucus in discussion of their separate goals, but left little time to reconvene and coalesce. The students criticized this failure to respond to the President's call to multiply minority strength through effective coalition.

Values, feasibility and effectiveness must be considered in choosing social policies to support.

Detecting examples of these categories was difficult during the conference, but emerged in later discussion. Students perceived a basic conflict in values between the definition of the problem as individual and group deviance from expected role-performance, or viewing the problem as caused by institutional nonresponsiveness. This dichotomy led to other value conflicts, regarding appropriate solutions to social problems, which also went unresolved.

Applying the factor of feasibility to the strategy of restructuring power relations within professional associations, the students considered the view of some conference participants that internal change was meaningless, in any case, because the organization has no power in the larger society. The students rejected this notion for two reasons:

1. The credence given to social change agents is reduced when professional groups fail to address internal racism and sexism to which they purport to offer societal solutions.

2. A parent group cannot justify calling on its member agencies to increase their representation of minority groups and revise their allocation of resources toward the most disadvantaged, if it does not serve as a role model.

The students concluded that it was feasible to attempt strategies of redistribution of power.

On the dimension of effectiveness, the students observed that the conference theme, "Breaking the Barriers to an Open Society" never became an umbrella for decision-making, under which the individual sessions would explore the theme in depth. They rated the conference ineffective in grappling with the problems of institutional racism and sexism. They left the conference unconvinced that professionals were unified or mobilized as a pressure group to effect the institutional change heralded by major speakers.

Conclusions:

The advantages of a student-faculty team's attendance at this conference were significant to the enhancement of the previous classroom teaching-learning experience, and for their far-reaching effects, as follows:

1. The students sharpened their ability to critically analyze, not only by experiencing the above principles in process, but also by exposure to new challenges.

2. Students became self-directed in their desire to participate actively in the dynamics of the conference and the organization.

3. Students developed an appreciation for the applicability to the real world of the theories learned in the classroom.

4. The abilities of students to observe the stages of policy formation were heightened.

5. Interaction among team members of different statuses of race, sex, age, ethnic background, and experience, resulted in greater tolerance and empathy, as well as more

productive communication.

6. The rapport between students and teacher, as well as among the students, provided the teacher with more effective tools.

7. Respect for the democratic process was fostered, along with a clearer understanding of its limitations.

8. The benefits of conference attendance suggest similar enrichment possibilities for wider university application.

Recommendations:

Sociology departments are urged to include in their budgets sufficient funds to permit teams to prepare in advance, attend, analyze and report on such conferences. Selection of conferences should reflect the interests of both students and faculty in a particular area of specialization.

Meetings should be held in advance of the conference to plan physical arrangements, to review past teams' reports, to peruse the pre-conference bulletin, and to tentatively select areas of concentration.

During the conference, informal meetings over meals and breaks afford frequent opportunities for interaction and consultation. A "final impressions" discussion before leaving the conference provides closure.

From discussion of a report to students and faculty back home, enthusiasm is likely to emerge, with new students expressing a desire to attend the following year. Thus, an innovative educational development establishes a continuity dependent on student input and response.

It is recognized that this particular method of extension of University walls through conference attendance, may

be financially or logistically prohibitive. In similar fashion, the innovative teacher should be on the alert for the many local opportunities to connect course principles with observable phenomena. For example, course work could be related to local conferences, town council and board of education meetings, zoning controversies, and legislative hearings.

Just as field settings enhance the classroom experience, the reverse is also true. Through applied sociology, students learn that academic principles can enhance an appreciation of the actual setting experienced, and uncover unsuspected linkages between the abstract and the real.

APPENDIX

Evolution of the field experience

1. Received departmental approval for student-faculty team budget for travel and expenses.

2. In advance of the conference, faculty member met with students planning to attend, shared conference preliminary program, and selected individual interest areas. Participant observation chosen as primary method, to afford widest flexibility and to tap more of the total context than survey or interview permit.

3. Travelled together from east coast to mid-western site of conference.

4. Faculty-student team attended first night social gathering, optimizing informal interaction opportunities with peers and future colleagues.

5. As a result of the gathering, suudents were invited to join in forming a youth caucus. One ultimately became the Acting President. The others remained less involved, as observers, noting the more specialized activity engaged in by their youth caucus peer.

6. Students met informally with faculty member for most meals and breaks, during which events unfolding were discussed.

7. Joint decision-making prevailed with sufficient autonomy to permit individuals to opt out of group plans.

8. Attended some sessions individually, but plenary sessions as a group, discussing expected and preferred outcomes.

9. At the conclusion of the conference, team met to summarize highlights and project future probabilities of conference response.

10. Planned and implemented group report to home department.

11. Manuscript prepared by instructor, and reviewed with comments by each team member.

12. In general, total immersion was the keynote feature of the team involvement.

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